

Biblical Hebrew *šninō*: A ‘Cautionary Tale’ of Root Identification

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Abstract

The present study comprises a philological examination of the Biblical Hebrew term *šninō*. The contextual semantics, the ancient translations, and the re-identification of the verbal root *ŠNY* as a by-form of *ŠNY* ‘to recount’ demonstrate that *šninō* may be realigned as related to this root and translated as a ‘cautionary tale’.

Keywords

Šninah – “cautionary tale” – proverb – byword – etymology – Proto-Semitic

The lexeme *šninō* is attested four times in the Hebrew Bible.¹ The root of the term is traditionally identified as *ŠNN* ‘to be sharp’. The term always appears in

*) We thank Dennis Pardee of the University of Chicago for reviewing a draft of this note. Abbreviations: D = *Doppelstamm*; G = *Grundstamm*; f. = feminine; m. = masculine; n. = noun; PS = Proto-Semitic; sbst. = substantive; vb. = verb.

1) Deut 28:37 (*lšammō lmošōl wlišninō*); 1 Kgs 9:7 (*lmošōl wlišninō*); Jer 24:9 (*hērpō ulmošōl lišninō wliqlōlō*); 2 Chr 7:20 (*lmošōl wlišninō*).

1X the word-pair *lməšəl wlišnino*.² English translations provide various glosses for
2 the phrase, attempting to translate word-for-word using near synonyms of the
3 two nouns. Whereas in this phrase *məšəl* is generally translated as ‘proverb’,
4 *šnino* is more ambiguously termed ‘byword’,³ ‘object of ridicule’,⁴ and alternat-
5 ing between ‘byword’ and ‘taunt’.⁵ There seems to have been little variation in
6 translation since the Authorized Version, which renders the term as ‘byword’
7 everywhere except in Jer 24:9, where ‘taunt’ is found. In English, *byword* has
8 historically been synonymous with *proverb*, and only as a result of the biblical
9 usage does the English term gain the nuance of “object of scorn or contempt”.⁶
10 Accordingly, the translation of *šnino* as ‘byword’, that is, in the original sense
11 ‘proverb’, indicates more about the translators’ understanding of the primary
12 sense of *məšəl* as ‘proverb’⁷ and of *lməšəl wlišnino* as a synonymous pair than
13 any original pejorative sense of the Hebrew term.⁸

14 Following a reassessment of the derivational semantics and the ancient
15 translations of Biblical Hebrew *šnino*, we propose an alternate solution to
16 understanding the term. The root is identified not as *ŠNN* ‘to be sharp’ but
17 rather as *ŠNN* ‘to recount’, a by-form of *ŠNY*. Thus the noun would refer to a
18 type of speech. This accounts for the term’s usage alongside *məšəl*, whose gen-
19 eral semantic field is ‘discourse’. Following this reanalysis, we conclude that the
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21 2) In all the instances, the formula *lməšəl wlišnino bkol hō‘ammim* is the same, except in Jer 24:9.
22 There the string *lməšəl wlišnino* appears in an expanded form, *lherpə ulməšəl lišnino wliqləḷə*,
23 and *bkol-hō‘ammim* ‘among all the peoples’ is replaced with *bkol-hammqomot ‘āšer-‘addihem*
24 *šom* ‘in all the places where I shall drive them’, i.e., everywhere the figurative “bad figs” will be
25 banished and ultimately exterminated.

26 3) JPS, ESV.

27 4) NIV, HCSB.

28 5) KJV, NKJV, NASB: ‘byword’ in Deut 28:37, 1 Kgs 9:7, and 2 Chr 7:20, and ‘taunt’ in Jer 24:9. NRSV:
29 ‘byword’ in Deut 28:37 and 2 Chr 7:20, and ‘taunt’ in 1 Kgs 9:7 and Jer 24:9.

30 6) “byword, n.”. *OED Online*. June 2013. Oxford University Press. <http://www.oed.com.proxy.uchicago.edu/view/Entry/25670?redirectedFrom=byword&> (accessed July 22, 2013). See the
31 Coverdale Translation of Deut 28:37, and subsequent usage of ‘byword’.

32 7) This note does not assert that ‘proverb’ should be the primary translation of *məšəl*. Rather we
33 acknowledge that biblical translations of the term in this context have traditionally assumed
34 ‘proverb’ as the standard translation of *məšəl* and the English use of the term ‘by-word’ in
35 translations of *šnino* were originally meant to be synonymous. The meaning of *məšəl* requires
36 separate treatment, but for the purposes of this study, we define it generally as a kind of
37 discourse.

38 8) It would seem that the etymological understanding of the related verbal root *ŠNN*, as noted
39 below, and a supposed common idiomatic usage with English are driving the understanding
40X of the Hebrew noun.

meaning of *lmwšl wlišninw* is best summarized as '[to serve] as a cautionary tale for others'.

Traditionally, lexicographers interpret *šninw* as 'a sharp word, taunt', identifying the root as *ŠNN* 'to be sharp'.⁹ Other associated nouns are *šen* 'tooth' (**šinn*),¹⁰ the compound *šenhabbim* 'ivory' (literally, 'tooth of elephants' with the well-known Egyptian word *'bw* 'elephant' whence Aramaic *yḇ* 'Elephantine'; see 1 Kgs 10:22; 2 Chr 9:21), and the proper noun *šen* 'Shen' (in the phrase *ben hammišpā uben haššen* 'between Mizpah and Shen' at 1 Sam 7:12), which may alternately be read as *bet yšwḥ* 'House of Jeshanah' (cf. 2 Chr 13:19).¹¹ Mishnaic Hebrew further evidences a feminine singular *šnnh* 'sharp', presumably vocalized *šnwḥ*, which carries this sense in its usage as a substantive, 'spear point'.¹²

Upon further investigation, it seems that Biblical Hebrew *šninw* should be understood as a **qatīlat*-type feminine noun deriving from the geminate root

- 9) Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and C. A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford, 1968), p. 1 (=BDB), p. 814; Wilhelm Gesenius, *Hebräisches und aramäisches Handwörterbuch über das Alte Testament*, 18th edition (Berlin, 1987-2012), p. 1395; L. Koehler and W. Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden, 2001) (= KB), p. 1606; Franciscus Zorell, *Lexicon Hebraicum et Aramaicum Veteris Testamenti* (Rome, 1946), p. 869; David J. A. Clines (ed.), *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*, vol. 8, p. 514; Eliezer Ben-Yehudah, *Thesaurus totius Hebraeae* (Tel-Aviv, 1908), p. 7328. Ben-Yehudah, however, questioned this relationship of *šninw* to *ŠNN* 'to be sharp', saying: "It is customary to interpret [*šninw*] in the sense of 'sharp' [*šnnw ḥd*], but *šanānu* in Assyrian has the sense of 'to be compared' [*nmšl, dwmh*], thus it is possible that *šninw* essentially has the sense of *mwšl* but requires [further] study" (p. 7328 fn 3).
- 10) The suggestion that "the vb. I *ŠNN* is probably not primary, but derived from the sbst. *šen*" (KB, p. 1606) is apropos except for the uncharacteristic stem distribution for such a denominative verb (B. Waltke and M. O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* [Winona Lake, 1990], §24.4; nevertheless, analogous examples are known, §22.5).
- 11) This proper noun is witnessed in Egyptian transcription (W. F. Albright, *The Vocalization of the Egyptian Syllabic Orthography* [American Oriental Series 5; New Haven, 1934], p. 36).
- 12) Sanhedrin 82a-b, explicating Num 25:7b, *wayyōqam mittok hō'edō wayyiqqah romah byōdō*, "He arose in the midst of the congregation and took a spear in his hand": *šlp šnnh whnyhḥ b'wnqlw nš'n whwlk 'l mqlw*, "He removed [its] *šnnh* and put it in his garment, going upon the stock [of the spear]..." See M. Jastrow, *Dictionary of the Targumim, Talmud Babli, Yerushalmi and Midrashic Literature* (New York, 1996), p. 1607. The word's base seems to be **qatalat*, like similarly patterned f.s. nouns from geminate roots, such as *qlbl* 'curse', *šmwḥ* 'desolation', or *dmwḥ* 'silence'.

1X ŠNN ‘to recount’.¹³ According to this explanation, the verbal root would be a
2 by-form of ŠNY ‘to recount’, the Biblical Hebrew reflex of Proto-Semitic TNY ‘to
3 repeat’.¹⁴ This lexicographical realignment would locate the term with the *Piel*
4 verb *wšinnantom* of Deut 6:7. The verb, like *šnino*, had been previously assigned
5 to root ŠNN ‘to be sharp’,¹⁵ but subsequent scholarship identified it as a by-form
6 of final-weak ŠNY ‘to recount’.¹⁶

7 The ancient Greek and Aramaic translations interpreted *šnino* as corre-
8 sponding not to a synonymous idea of ‘proverb’ or ‘ridicule’, as found in the
9 English versions, but to the somewhat more general notion of ‘spoken dis-
10 course’, as the contextual usage suggests. The Septuagint translates the term in
11 Deut 28:37 and 2 Chr 7:20 as διήγηματος ‘story, tale’ and in 1 Kgs 9:7 as ἀλάλημα
12 ‘speech’. In Jer 24:9, though, one finds μῖσος ‘hatred’, presumably interpreting
13 the *Vorlage* as related to the root ŠN ‘to hate’.¹⁷ Likewise, Targum Onkelos
14 (Deut 28:37), Targum Jonathan (1 Kgs 9:7; Jer 24:9), and the Late Jewish Literary
15 Aramaic version of Chronicles (2 Chr 7:20) translate *šnino* as šw’y ‘tale’, whose
16 root Š’Y means ‘to narrate’.¹⁸ The synonym *tnwy* ‘story, narration’ is found in
17 Targum Neofiti at Deut 28:37. Furthermore, the translation of the Hebrew ver-
18 bal root ŠNN in Deut 6:7 (Onkelos and Neofiti) employs the Aramaic cognate
19 TNY ‘to narrate, teach’ (< PS *TNY ‘to repeat’).

22 13) Other examples of original **qatīlat* nouns from geminate roots in Biblical Hebrew include:
23 *ššišō* ‘raisin cake’, *glilo* ‘territory; boundary’, *hanino* ‘compassion’, *lbibo* ‘cake, pastry’, *mlilo*
24 ‘ear of wheat’, *ālilo* ‘deed, action’, *plilo* ‘judge’, and *šhiho* ‘barren land’. The last of these
25 examples may evidence a by-form of the final-weak root ŠHW ‘to be parched’.

26 14) Other verbal reflexes of this PS root are found in Aramaic (Christian Palestinian, Jewish
27 Babylonian, and Syriac TNY ‘to repeat’, D ‘to narrate, teach’, also see Mandaic TNA ‘to
28 repeat’, Ugaritic (*tny* G ‘to repeat, reiterate’), Arabic (*tanā* ‘to double, fold’, Form-II *tannā*
29 ‘to make double, repeat’), Sabaean (*htny* ‘double amount of tribute’), and Akkadian (*šanū*
30 D ‘to repeat, report’). Some have suggested a possible etymological connection with TNY
31 found at Judg 5:11 and 11:40 and in Lachish 3 line 12 *tnnhw* ‘I can recount it’ (D. Pardee,
32 et al., *Handbook of Ancient Hebrew Letters: A Study Edition* (SBL Sources for Biblical Study
15) Chico, CA, 1982], p. 84, 86).

33 15) BDB, p. 815c.

34 16) G. R. Driver, “Problems of the Hebrew Text and Language”, in F. Nötscher (ed.),
35 *Alttestamentliche Studien* (Bonner Biblische Beiträge 1; Bonn, 1950), p. 48; KB, p. 1606.

36 17) See elsewhere μῖσος translated for *šinō* ‘hatred, enmity’ at 2 Sam 13:15 and Ezek 23:29. This
37 interpretation could have been motivated, at least in part, by a textual variant similar to
38 that witnessed in the Samaritan Pentateuch *wšn(’)yn* at Deut 28:37.

39 18) It should be noted that the negative connotation of ‘telling a joke’ or ‘making a mockery’
40X is also attested by the Aramaic, providing a semantic analogy with the modern usage of
41 the English term *byword* as discussed above.

In light of this, the lexical entry for the noun *šninō* ought to be realigned. 1X
 With the exception of the alternate reading of Jer 24:9 in the Septuagint, the 2
 ancient translations alongside the etymological reassessment of *šNN* at Deut 3
 6:7 indicate that the primary sense of *šninō* should be 'recounting'. This descrip- 4
 tor is, as it is used by the biblical authors, similar to *mōšōl*, yet necessarily dis- 5
 tinct, as a repeated discourse of a heuristic nature. This discourse serves to 6
 pronounce an impending judgment. The recipients of the admonishment are 7
 the lands and nations that would observe divine repudiation. In its contextual 8
 usage, the phrase 'to be a *mōšōl* and a *šninō*', that is, 'to be a [source of] repeated 9
 discourse of a heuristic nature' as well as the negative descriptions 'to be a 10
šammō' (Deut 28:37) and 'to be a *ḥerpo* . . . to be a *qlōlō*' (Jer 24:9), has the notion 11
 of '[serving] as a cautionary tale'. Moreover, the term *mōšōl* and its verbal root 12
 appear without *šninō* in other configurations with a similar connotation.¹⁹ 13

19) Each of these usages appear in a poetic passage where the full idiom may likely be 35
 suggested by the initial half of the word pair: a cautionary tale for the other nations 36
 (*ḥerpo limšōl-bōm goyim*, Joel 2:17; *tšimenu mōšōl baggoyim mnod-roš bal-ummim*, Ps 37
 44:15); a cautionary tale for others of the speaker's social circle (*wo'ēhi lhem lmošōl*, Ps 38
 69:12-13); and a cautionary tale amongst the nation (*l'ot wlimšōlim whikrattiw mittok* 39
'ammi, Ezek 14:8). 40X